

STURGEON:

MERCURY PLUS X

Sturgeon? The name was magnetic. There it was, perpetually cropping up attached to the stories I most admired. Sturgeon: quite an ordinary Anglo-American word among exotics like A. E. Van Vogt, Isaac Asimov, Heinlein, Simak, and Kuttner. Yet -- spikey, finny, odd. And it was not his original name. Theodore Hamilton Sturgeon was born Edward Hamilton Waldo. To the usual boring undeserving parents. That was on Staten Island, the year the First World War ended.

So there were two of him, as there are of many a good writer. A bright side, a dark side -- much like our old SF image of Mercury, remember, so much more interesting than banal reality. He had a mercurial temperament.

The bright side was the side everybody loved. There was something so damned nice, charming, open, empathic, and elusive about Ted that women flocked to him. Men too. Maybe he was at the mercy of his own fey sexuality. If so, he was quizzical about it, as about everything. One of his more cutesy titles put it admirably: "If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?" Not if it was Sturgeon, said a too-witty friend.

He played his guitar. He sang. He shone. He spoke of his philosophy of love.

Ted honestly brought people happiness. If he was funny, it was a genuine humor which sprang from seeing the world aslant. A true SF talent. Everyone recognized his strange quality -- "faunlike," some nut dubbed it; faunlike he certainly looked. Inexplicable, really.

~~Unsympathetic stepfather, unsatisfactory adolescence. Funny jobs, and~~ "Ether Breather" out in Astounding in 1939. So to an even funnier job, science fiction writer. It's flirting with disaster.

I could not believe those early stories: curious subject matter, bizarre resolutions, glowing style. And about sexuality. You could hardly believe your luck when one of Ted's stories went singing through your head.

"It", with Cartier illustrations, in Unknown. Terrifying. "Derm Fool". Madness. The magnificent "Microcosmic God," read and re-read. "Killdozer", appearing after a long silence. There were to be other silences. "Baby is Three": again the sense of utter incredibility with complete conviction, zinging across a reader's synapses. By a miracle, the blown-up version, "More Than Human", was no disappointment either. This was Sturgeon's caviar dish. Better even than "Venus Plus X", with its outre' sexuality in a hermaphrodite utopia.

As for those silences. Something sank Sturgeon. His amazing early success, his popularity with fans and stardom at conventions -- they told against the writer. Success is a vampire. In the midst of life we are in definite trouble. They say Sturgeon was the first author in the field ever to sign a six-book contract. A six-book contract was a rare mark of distinction, like being crucified. A mark of extinction. Ted was no stakhanovite and the deal did for him; he was reduced to writing a novelization of a schlock TV series, "Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea," to fulfill his norms.

At one time, he was reduced further to writing TV pilot scripts for Hollywood. He lived in motels or trailers, between marriages, between lives. Those who read "The Dreaming Jewels" or "Venus Plus X" or the story collections forget that writing is secretly a heavy load, an endless battle against the disappointments which come from within as well as without -- and reputation a heavier load. Ted was fighting his way back to the light when night came on.

About Ted's dark side.

Well, he wrote that memorable novel, "Some of Your Blood," about this crazy psychotic who goes for drinking menstrual discharge. Actually, it does not taste as bad as Ted made out. That was his bid to escape the inescapable adulation.

Our would-be writers circulated their effusions around the table for everyone's comment. One would-be was a plump, pallid, unhappy lady. Her story was a fantasy about a guy who tried three times to commit suicide, only to be blocked each time by a green monster from Hell who wanted him to keep on suffering. Sounds promising, but the treatment was hopeless.

Unexpected response. She stared at me in shock. Then she burst into a hailstorm of tears, collapsing onto the table... "Three times," she cried. Everyone looked fit to faint.

"So have I," said Sturgeon calmly.

If that does not strike you as a positive story, I'm sorry. I'm not knocking suicide, either. Everyone should try it at least once.

There are troves of lovely Sturgeon tales (as in the collection labelled "E Pluribus Unicorn"), like "Bianca's Hands," which a new generation would delight in. He wrote well, if sometimes over-lushly. In many ways, Ted was the direct opposite of the big technophile names of his generation, like Doc Smith, Poul Anderson, Robert Heinlein, et al. His gaze was more closely fixed on people. For that we honored him, and still honor him. Good for him that he never ended up in that prick's junkyard where they pay you a million dollars advance for some crud that no sane man wants to read.

Brian Aldiss

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